

“Get Back in the Boat!”

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 9, 2020

Psalm 85:8-13 ~ Romans 10:5-15 ~ Matthew 14:22-33

When I was in seminary, I stopped one afternoon at a neighborhood grocery store. It was right in the middle of a downpour, but I had promised to bring a snack to our study group. A stream of water four inches deep was flowing through the parking lot at the main entrance, and I spied a young mother balancing a bag of groceries and infant daughter in one arm ... pulling her young son along with the other. When they reached the stream, they paused. "Jump!" she said, so he jumped ... both feet right into the middle of the stream with a big splash and a big smile. Of course, Mom meant he should jump over the water. But where she saw obstacle, he saw opportunity. So, when Mom said "Jump!" he assumed she was giving him permission to go for it. She was good-natured about it, and just rolled her eyes and looked at me as if to say, "What can you do?" Then she stooped to take his hand and said, "Good jump! Let's go home now."

Sometimes we make a leap of faith thinking it's just what God wants us to do ... then we find ourselves sinking in the middle of a mess because it isn't so easy to play Jesus after all. We start out with good intentions thinking that we are bold and right and protected by Divine power. But before long we're throwing up our hands and saying, "Lord, help me!" That's what happened to Simon Peter in our gospel story today.

I have a new theory about why Simon Peter was so anxious to join Jesus out on the water. Oh, sure. He wanted to do great things for Jesus. And it was probably the best way for him to be sure that it really was Jesus walking the whitecaps and not some ghost or demon or hallucination. "Lord," he said, "*if it is you, command me to come join you on the water.*" But I suspect Peter was just as anxious to get out of the boat as he was to walk on the water. After all, he had been sailing all night long with those eleven other guys! James and John with their constant bickering, whiny Thomas gainsaying every good idea, and God knows, Matthew could be taxing (get it...he was a tax collector.)

These guys had been too close for too long, and I figure Peter was sick of it. Even Jesus wanted to get away from them. After the feeding of the five thousand, he said, "Uh, you guys go on ahead. Yeah. That's the ticket. I'll catch up with you later." But he didn't come right along. He went up to the mountain top first ... to pray in blessed solitude ... just a few hours away from the ceaseless chatter. Peter may have felt like I have when I've been in a crowded van on the way home from a family vacation. You know the feeling ... you love everybody ... but you

just can't wait to be alone. I figure, after a few hours in a small boat with those guys, the storm didn't look so bad to Peter.

What's really going on in this story? Is it about Jesus' power to do miracles? Matthew, Mark, and John all report this miracle in connection with the feeding of the five thousand as a way of showing that Jesus has God's power over nature. In the Bible the sea often represents the demonic powers that want to destroy us ... the flood that engulfs and overwhelms us ... the wind and the waves and the storms that assail us. But here is a picture of Jesus calmly in control of them all.

There's a play on words in the Greek. When the disciples see Jesus walking on the water, they are terrified, and he immediately reassures them: "*Take heart, it is I. Fear not.*" But the words "*Ego eimi*" translated "It is I" also mean, more simply, "I am." And as you know, "I am" is the name of Israel's God in the Old Testament. When Jesus says "I am" before the ruling council in Jerusalem, they rip their robes and shout "Blasphemy!" It leads to his crucifixion. But in this story, here is Jesus ... Master of the demonic powers of the deep ... Lord over the storm ... Victor against the wind and the waves ... calmly telling us why he can do the impossible ... Jesus is the Old Testament "I am" in the flesh.

Of course, he's not the only character in the story. Maybe this is a story about faith and us doing great things in Jesus' name. We have to admire Peter's courage. He's out there. He's trying. Like the bumper sticker says, "*Before you can walk on water, you have to get out of the boat.*" Peter is out there, and for a moment he's walking tall, but then.

Peter notices the wind and waves ... he starts to sink ... he cries out. Jesus stops, takes Peter's hand, rolls his eyes as if to say, "What can you do?" "*Oligopistos*" he calls him ... tenderly, I think. It's a nickname, meaning "Little Faith." Like a native American name ... Red Cloud, Sitting Bull ... Little Faith. "*Little Faith, why did you doubt?*"

Here is where most preachers will tell you that if you will only keep your eyes on Jesus ... if you will only be absolute in your faith ... perfect ... unwavering ... without a scintilla of doubt ... you can walk on water and do other things that Jesus did. But I think the story wants to tell us that it is not our faith ... our perfection ... our lack of wavering that gets things done for God. We aren't perfect. We do waver. We notice the wind and the waves. It is not our faith, but Christ's faith ... not our power but Christ's power, and his strong hand that pulls us through ... for without him we can't do a blessed thing.

In some ways this sounds like a resurrection story ... pushed back earlier into the gospel. It's early in the morning, still dark. The disciples are all together in one place ... troubled and fearful because the wind is against them. They see Jesus but think he's a ghost. Jesus says, "Fear not!" ... just like in the other resurrection stories. The point would be, "Don't be afraid ...

in the terrors of the night the risen Christ is with you ... with you in the dark ... with you on the deep ... with you in the storm."

Or maybe it's a baptism story. Peter walks out on the water ... sinks beneath the waves ... he has to admit that he is powerless ... that he needs a higher power. Then he cries out the prayer of salvation ... "Lord! Help me!" ... and Jesus pulls him out of the water and into life. If that's not a picture of baptism, I don't know what is.

Miracle ... faith ... baptism ... resurrection ... I suppose the story is about all of these, and more than anything else ... it's about a boat called the church. You see, in Matthew's day ... in the earliest Christian tombs ... before the cross became the central symbol of our faith ... they would inscribe a small boat on the tombs as the symbol of the church. Meaning ... they were all in this boat together ... a people saved by passing through the waters of death into new life. They were the people that God had pulled out of the water in the middle of the storm. They were the people riding Noah's ark ... experiencing miracle, faith, baptism, resurrection.

In this story Jesus pulls Peter up out of the water. Then he pulls Peter back into the boat. The disciples all make a confession of faith: "*Truly you are the Son of God!*" And there... in the boat ... in the church ... with Jesus ... the wind and the waves are stilled.

Matthew is giving us a picture of the church in his day ... a small band of believers huddled together against the winds of persecution and the waves of doubt. How could they stand against the world? ... only if Jesus was with them ... only if they stayed together in the boat.

I think it's still a good picture of the church in our day. Nowadays even the mega-churches struggle to hold on to their members and the younger generations aren't interested in building institutions the way their grandparents did. Going to church isn't particularly popular, so churches try to be more entertaining ... they try to put on a show in order to compete with all the other options in our consumer culture.

And, Lord knows, the wind is against us. We are floating on the great cultural sea ... the winds of violence ... the waves of materialism ... the storms of exclusivity ... the whirlpools of individualism ... they all flow hard against our values of peace and spirit and inclusion and community. We go out these doors struggling against a world that says you are what you own ... that you should reject those who aren't like you ... that you must crush those who disagree with you. We hear the news about random acts of senseless violence and we wonder why, but we know why. Everybody knows why. We decide that they are signs of, "Just another nut cracking," but they're cracking under the same pressures that we face. They are symptoms of what is sick in our society as a whole ... with its celebration of violence and its worship of success and its model of the rugged, isolated loner.

Some action star makes millions of dollars shooting and blowing up people on the big screen. We all go to watch. Some guy on the streets of Southside Chicago or on the roads of rural Wisconsin does the same thing, and we shake our heads and wonder why? We know better, but we get out on that sea alone ... thinking we're going to change the world ... and it isn't long before we notice the wind and the waves and start to sink into it ourselves.

We need the boldness of Simon Peter ... to get out of the boat and fight the storm ... fight it for all we're worth ... to declare the good news of our God that is so subversive to our society ... to live the love of Christ instead ... to transform this mess into a habitat hospitable to humanity and God. And that work takes considerable courage through the long night. But we can't do it on our own. We need Jesus. And we need a church. You see, from time to time, we've got to get back in the boat.

Oh, I know, sometimes the boat seems to have too many captains, and not enough sailors. We get mad at somebody for being rude or tying a knot the wrong way. Some people think we ought to sail east and the others think we ought to sail west. The water may look more inviting. So we decide to get out of the boat and swim on our own ... or maybe just keep one hand on the edge while we float along in the water. Well, that's fine when the weather is sunny and calm. But what are we going to do when the wind comes up and the waves break and the storm threatens to take us under? Who's going to visit us when we're in the hospital or pray for us when we get bad news from our doctor? Who's going to encourage and support us ... but also challenge and confront us so we can mature in our spirit? Who's going to feed the poor and clothe the naked and care about the people who are left out of the prosperity that our economy bestows on the select few? Who's going to make sure there's a spiritual community here for our children and for our children's children? Are we going to do it all by ourselves floating alone out on the cultural sea? So I want to say ... stay in the boat God has given you. Stay in the church even when it disappoints or hurts or angers you. Stay and help us make it a better boat. But stay, because it's a lifeboat. It's your lifeboat!

May we pray?

God of the storm and the deep, we do not come to you today with bold promises of the great labors we can perform for you, but with the simple plea like Peter's, "Lord, help us." You have given us this community of faith as a place to experience and share your love, but we take it too much for granted. How suddenly the storm rises, and the wind and the waves are against us. Teach us to forgive and to love and to connect and to heal, and then send us out to rescue those who are perishing. Here, in this moment, in this place, today, still the storms that rage beyond us and within us and let us rejoice in each other as we take your outstretched hand. Amen.